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Eric C. Shoaf

Clemson University, shoaf@clemson.edu

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Fender Bass VI

Rare Miss Proves Leo Was Ahead of His Time

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By ERIC C. SHOAF



Fender broke new musical ground in late 1951 with the introduction of the Precision Bass. This archetype of amplified music's bottom-end set the stage for rock and roll, and transformed everything from recording to concert performance. The Jazz Bass of 1960 was an important next step in moving the electric bass into an even more "guitar-like" direction.

And then there was the Fender Bass VI.

Introduced in '61, it completed the transformation. With its 30" scale (rather than the longer 34" of the Precision and Jazz), Strat-like pickups and adjustable bridge saddles, thin neck, and Jazzmaster-like body shape and switching setup, the Bass VI seemed almost as much a long-scale guitar as it was short-scale six-string bass.

And it was. It even had a tremolo bar!

Standard finish for the Bass VI was sunburst, and fingerboards were rosewood. The headstock logo actually read "Fender VI" in large cursive script with a smaller "Electric Bass Guitar" in block print. The new model was developed for evolving musical tastes and the changing needs of performing musicians.

In an unusual fumbling, however, Leo Fender failed to reach his intended bass-playing audience. He had hoped to offer them a guitar-like alternative, but most bassists found the neck – already crowded with two extra strings – much too thin for comfort. And the short scale length may have reminded others of a student-grade instrument. One prominent user was Jack Bruce, who played in Eric Clapton's supergroup, Cream, and it did seem to serve the music of that band. But Bruce played bass more like a solo instrument, and his busy excursions up and down the neck (not to mention the over-boosted fuzztone he favored) didn't inspire imitators to adopt the Bass VI in any appreciable number.

In retrospect, the decision to market the instrument as a short-scale six-string bass rather than a long-scale electric guitar may have severely limited its appeal.

Leo tinkered with the design, adding different pickups in '63, but that didn't increase sales to any extent. In '65, the Bass VI received white binding on its neck (as did the Precision and Jazz basses and the Jaguar and Jazzmaster). Block position markers replaced dots in '66.

Alas, timing is crucial to the potential success of any product, and the simple fact is that Fender was ahead of demand for an instrument like the Bass VI. Only about 100 per year were shipped before the company was sold to CBS in '65. It remained in production until '75 but never received credit for being such an innovative design.

Early examples are scarce today, but demand is low except among Fender "completeists" whose collections require one of everything the company made.

In the '90s, almost anything and everything guitar-related was being reissued, including the Bass VI. Fender of Japan produced a fine reissue which sold fairly well and this time most users played it like a baritone guitar rather than a bass. While it didn't break new musical ground, it certainly added another color in the guitarist's palette of tones.

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